PATTERNS OF POWER

The Costume and the Body

A foundational brief on the second proposition — that every durable hierarchy runs the same belief-machine whatever its creed; that legitimating belief is installed formation and not false consciousness; that it breeds a class to interpret it; and that what divides one creed from another is never truth but whether it can be debugged

Thomas J. Bryan

with Claude (Anthropic)

Preface

This brief is not a case study but a foundational statement — it sits with the project's account of the machine and of position logic, and it exists to refine the second of the project's load-bearing propositions: that durable rule rests a floor of force beneath a managed belief, and that the belief works not by being true but by being installed. The case studies of the American and England series lean on that proposition at every turn; this brief states it in its general form and defends it against the objection most likely to be raised, which comes, as it happens, from the Marxist tradition that has thought hardest about ideology and got one crucial thing wrong.

The argument runs in six moves. The word religion, in the project's instruction to bracket the truth of any belief and read its function, was always a placeholder for the wider category of the legitimating creed, whatever its vocabulary; the same belief-machine runs beneath a god, a market, and a dialectic, and the classical students of power — Mosca, Pareto, Weber — saw the formula clearly but stopped short of seeing what it does inside a person. Three costumes — the ordained order, the liberal meritocracy, the Leninist vanguard — are shown to be one body in three wardrobes, each naturalising its hierarchy by the same move and each breeding a class to interpret it. The reigning name for the thing, false consciousness, is then rejected twice over: as incoherent, because it presupposes a clear lens beneath the installed one that the second proposition denies, and as self-exempting, because the concept is itself the political formula of an interpreter class, the vanguard's own credential dressed as a diagnosis. The belief is real and installed, not false; what is manipulated is which formation gets laid down, and the believer reasons correctly from within it, because the belief is the very standard of the reasoning. Every institutionalised creed breeds an interpreter class — not a fourth part of the machine but the form the belief-dial takes at scale, and double-edged, because with its own base it can turn the formula back on the apex it serves. And finally the proposition is kept from collapsing into relativism by the distinction that does the real dividing: not true versus false, which is barred, but tested versus revealed — whether a creed can be debugged or has sealed itself shut — a blade the framework must, in honesty, turn on itself.

A Note on This Collaboration

The framework is Thomas J. Bryan's: that durable rule is a managed belief over a floor of force; that people decide by weighing the benefit their formation taught them to value against the cost the world will impose; and that belief is installed formation, laid down before it can be appraised, so that there is no free rational citizen waiting underneath. The sharpening carried through this brief — that religion was always a placeholder for the legitimating creed as such; that false consciousness is both incoherent and a specimen of the very machine it claims to expose; that the interpreter class is the institutional form the belief-dial takes at scale and is double-edged; and that the tested-versus-revealed distinction is what keeps substrate-independence from becoming relativism — was developed in dialogue under the discipline he insists on: stress-test rather than flatter, count the costs on every side, and hold every thesis, this one above all, as tested and never revealed.

The research, the reconstruction of the intellectual lineage, the verification, and the prose are the work of Claude (Anthropic). The brief credits the tradition it draws on and marks where it departs: from Mosca and Pareto it takes the political formula and the derivation but adds the formation; from Weber the theodicy of the fortunate; from Gramsci the organic intellectual and hegemony; from Bourdieu and Althusser the habitus, the doxa, and the apparatus that installs them; and from Marx, Engels, and Lenin it takes the concept of false consciousness in order to refuse it. These connections and corrections were developed in that dialogue and are jointly held.

The Argument in Six Parts

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I. The Placeholder

How the word religion always stood in for the legitimating creed as such; how the same belief-machine runs beneath a god, a market, and a dialectic; and how the classical students of power saw the formula but stopped short of the formation.

II. Three Costumes

How the divinely ordained order, the liberal meritocracy, and the Leninist vanguard are one body in three wardrobes — each naturalising its hierarchy by the same move, each breeding a class to interpret it.

III. Against False Consciousness

Why the reigning name for the thing is the wrong name: incoherent, because it presupposes a clear lens beneath the installed one; and self-exempting, because the concept is itself the political formula of an interpreter class.

IV. The Logic From Within

Why the believer is not duped; how a belief installed early becomes the very standard by which the believer reasons; and how the lens is ground — Bourdieu's habitus and doxa, Althusser's apparatus and interpellation.

V. The Interpreter Class

Why every institutionalised belief breeds a class to keep it; what that position makes it want; whether it is a fourth part of the machine or the form the belief-dial takes at scale; and why it is double-edged.

VI. The Residue That Is Not Relativism

How to hold that all belief is installed formation without collapsing into the claim that all beliefs are equal; why the dividing line is debuggability and not truth; and why the framework must turn the blade on itself.

PART I

THE PLACEHOLDER

How the word "religion" was always standing in for something larger; how the same machine runs beneath a god, a market, and a dialectic; and why the classical students of power saw the formula but stopped short of the formation

What the Instruction Always Meant

The foundational statement of this project carries an instruction that has done quiet work in every study since: bracket the truth of any religion, and analyse instead how the belief functions. The word in that sentence that never earned its keep is *religion*. It was a placeholder. What the instruction was always reaching for is the wider category of which religion is one instance — the *legitimating belief*, the account a hierarchy gives of why its arrangement is the way of things, whatever vocabulary that account is written in. Drop the placeholder and the proposition stands in its general form: every durable hierarchy rests a floor of force beneath a managed belief, and the belief does its work not by being true but by being *installed* — laid down in the formative years, before it can be appraised, and tended thereafter by people whose position depends on its remaining authoritative. The content of the belief is the costume. The function and the mechanism are the body, and the body is the same under every costume the species has worn.

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The Body Beneath

The point can be put as a separation the rest of this brief will hold to. A legitimating belief has three things about it that can be examined apart from one another. It has *content* — the propositions it asserts, that a god ordained the order, or that the market rewards desert, or that a party reads the laws of history. It has a *function* — to make a particular distribution of power and reward feel less like an imposition and more like the grain of reality, so that the arrangement is defended by its beneficiaries and, more importantly, accepted by those it costs. And it has a *mechanism* — it is embedded early, through the institutions that own a person's formative years, and maintained late, through a class equipped to interpret it. The content is endlessly variable and, for the analysis of power, very nearly irrelevant. The

function is invariant. The mechanism is invariant. A study of power that fixes on the content — that asks whether the god is real or the dialectic sound — has been captured by the costume and has missed the body entirely. The discipline is to bracket the content and read the function and the mechanism, and to do it as readily for a creed one shares as for one one finds absurd.

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The Formula, Seen and Half-Seen

This is not a new sighting, and honesty requires naming the tradition that saw it first. The Italian school of Mosca and Pareto named the thing with precision more than a century ago: every ruling minority, Mosca held, legitimates itself through a *political formula* — divine right, popular sovereignty, the nation, the science of history — and the formula is universal, present in every organised society including, he was careful to add, the communist ones. Pareto gave it a harder edge, distinguishing the *residues*, the actual drives of action, from the *derivations*, the rationalising doctrines draped over them, and observing that the doctrines change while the structure does not. Weber saw the demand the formula answers when he wrote that the fortunate are never content merely to be fortunate but need to know they have a *right* to their fortune — that, in his phrase, good fortune wants to be legitimate fortune. The tradition saw the formula clearly. Where it stopped short, and where this project departs from it, is at the question of what the formula does inside a person. Mosca's formula is something the rulers *deploy*; it leaves intact the picture of a subject who might, in principle, see through it. The second proposition denies exactly that picture, and the denial is the whole of what follows.

PART II

THREE COSTUMES

How the divinely ordained order, the liberal meritocracy, and the Leninist vanguard are one body in three wardrobes — each naturalising its hierarchy by the same move, each producing the same conviction that those on top belong there

The First Costume: The Ordained Order

The oldest costume needs the least description because it is the one the word *religion* already names. A hierarchy is held to mirror a cosmic order: the king reigns by divine right, the castes descend from a sacred body, the priest stands nearer the god than the layman and so nearer the truth. The function is plain — the arrangement is not the contingent outcome of who held the spears when the question was settled, but the visible hem of an eternal pattern, and to resist it is not merely dangerous but impious. And it carries, as every costume will, its interpreter: the one who reads the scripture the layman cannot, whose standing rests on the belief remaining authoritative and its reading remaining a specialised art.

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The Second Costume: The Meritocracy

The liberal-democratic costume looks at first like the opposite of the religious one, being secular, reasoned, and proud of having outgrown superstition — which is precisely what makes it the better illustration of the thesis, because the body underneath is identical. Here the conviction is that those who rule and own do so by *desert*: they are the educated, the enlightened, the able; their position is the visible measure of their merit, their effort, or at one remove the merit and effort of their ancestors. Weber had already named the engine before the word existed — the theodicy of the fortunate, the fortunate man's need to be convinced he deserves his fortune in comparison with others — and the word itself, *meritocracy*, was coined in 1958 by Michael Young as the name of a *dystopia*, a satire on a society that had perfected the belief that the successful had earned everything and the failing deserved their failure, before being adopted, with the irony stripped out, as a compliment. Bourdieu supplied the mechanism in detail: the advantages of birth, transmitted as the tastes and confidence and credentials he called cultural capital and installed as a *habitus* before the child can notice the installing, so that an inheritance arrives

wearing the face of an achievement and the comfortable can believe, without insincerity, that they earned what they were given. The interpreter here is not the priest but the credentialed expert, the jurist, the economist — the holder of a literacy the layman lacks, who certifies that the distribution is rational.

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The Third Costume: The Vanguard

The Marxist-Leninist costume is the sharpest case of all, because it was sewn by tailors who believed they had abolished costumes altogether — who held that *theirs* was not ideology but science, the at-last-undistorted view of the material conditions. And yet the body shows through unmistakably. The vanguard party are the ones who grasp the laws of history too intricate for ordinary people to follow; thank goodness they are here to wield the state so that the capitalist cannot seize the means and exploit you; their authority is the necessary guardianship of a truth the masses cannot reach unaided. Lenin wrote the formula down in 1902 with a candour the others never matched: the workers, by their own effort, can attain only *trade-union consciousness*, and socialist consciousness must be *brought to them from without*, by the educated intelligentsia. Read that sentence with the costume off and it is the priest saying the layman cannot read the god, transposed exactly — the interpreter class, here the party theoretician, naturalising its own indispensability by defining the people it rules as constitutively unable to see what it sees. Three costumes; one move; one body. The hierarchy is natural, those on top belong there, and a class stands ready to explain why to anyone who doubts it.

PART III

AGAINST FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

Why the most influential name for the thing this project studies is the wrong name — incoherent on the framework's own terms, and, worse, itself a specimen of the belief-machine it claims to expose

The Clear Lens That Is Not There

The reigning name for "a belief installed by power against the interest of the believer" is *false consciousness*, and the second proposition rejects it — not as a detail but as a category error, and the rejection is the load-bearing move of this brief. The term was coined by Engels in an 1893 letter, after Marx's death, to describe a thinker who proceeds with motives hidden from himself; later Marxism made it the name for the masses' acceptance of an order that exploits them. Its trouble is in the word *false*. To call a consciousness false is to imply a true one underneath it — a clear lens that ideology has smudged, a rational self that, but for the manipulation, would see its real interests plainly, and that critique might wipe clean and liberate. The framework denies that there is any such lens under the installed one. Formation goes all the way down; the belief laid in before appraisal *is* the lens through which the person sees, not a film over a clear lens they would otherwise see through. There is no undistorted baseline self waiting to be freed, because there is no self prior to some formation or other. And so *false* has nothing to be false *against*. The belief is not false. It is installed. That is a different category, and it is the correct one.

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The Concept Is a Specimen of the Disease

The deeper objection is that false consciousness does not merely misdescribe the machine; it is *a part of* one. The concept has a structure, and the structure is self-exempting: the masses are deluded, and the theorist sees clearly. But that asymmetry — *your view is distorted by your conditions, mine is the science of those conditions* — is not a neutral diagnosis. It is, to the letter, the legitimating move of an interpreter class, the very move catalogued in the costume before. It is the priesthood's claim that the laity cannot read the god; it is Lenin's claim that consciousness must come from without. The concept of false

consciousness, in other words, is the vanguard's political formula wearing the lab coat of a diagnosis — the device by which the party naturalises its rule, by defining itself as the keeper of the true consciousness the people lack. This is why it cannot be the project's instrument. An analysis of legitimating belief that adopts *false consciousness* has not stepped outside the machine to examine it; it has been recruited by one of the machine's own interpreter classes and handed that class's chief credential.

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Manipulated, Not False

What remains, once the wrong word is set down, is the formulation this proposition actually holds, and it can be made exact. The belief is *real*: genuinely held, world-constituting, the actual framework through which the believer weighs everything else. What is *manipulated* is not the belief's reality but its *selection* — a hierarchy that controls the schools, the rites, and the saturated formative years installs, from among the many formations a person might have received, the one that happens to legitimate it. And whether the belief's content is *accurate* — whether wealth tracks merit, whether the dialectic is real — is a further and separate question, which the discipline brackets, because the function does not depend on the answer. A belief need not be true to be load-bearing; it need only be installed and tended. "Manipulated but not false" is therefore not a softening of the older idea but a correction of it: the manipulation is real, the belief is real, and the word *false* — with its smuggled clear lens and its self-exempting theorist — is the one thing in the picture that has to go.

PART IV

THE LOGIC FROM WITHIN

Why the believer is not stupid and not duped; how a belief installed early becomes the very standard by which the believer reasons; and how the embedding is done

Not Duped

The temptation, having seen that a belief serves the hierarchy that installed it, is to conclude that the believer has been fooled — that beneath the credence sits a person who, shown the trick, would drop it. That conclusion is the false-consciousness reflex creeping back, and it is both wrong and, in a quiet way, contemptuous. The believer has not made an error inside a shared framework of reasoning; the belief *is* the framework inside which the believing is done. From within the meritocratic formation it is simply rational to read success as desert, because desert-tracks-success is one of the premises the formation supplied. From within the vanguard formation it is rational to defer to the party, because the party's privileged access is a premise. Position logic, the project's first proposition, runs all the way down into the second: people decide rationally given the values their formation installed, and the formation installed the values before they were in any position to decline them. There is no stupidity to find here, and looking for it is a category mistake wearing the mask of sympathy.

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How the Lens Is Ground

If the belief is not argued into the adult but installed in the child, the question is how, and here the twentieth century's sociology did the project's spadework. Bourdieu's *habitus* names the result — a durable disposition, a "feel for the game," laid down by upbringing so deep that it operates beneath deliberation and presents the arbitrary arrangements of one's class as simply the way things are, a condition he called *doxa*: the undiscussed because undiscussable, the part of the world that never comes up for question because it is the ground one stands on to ask questions at all. Althusser named the apparatus: the school above all, but also the family, the church, the media — the *ideological state apparatuses* that, unlike the police and the courts, secure the order not by force but by formation, *interpellating* the subject, hailing each person into a place already prepared and a self that recognises the

place as its own. This is the machinery behind a plain observation: a hierarchy that must win each generation's assent afresh by argument is fragile, but a hierarchy that owns the formative years and installs its formula as the child's default lens has the assent before the argument can begin. That is the advantage the second proposition is centrally about — not persuasion, which can be answered, but formation, which sets the terms on which any later answering will be done.

PART V

THE INTERPRETER CLASS

Why every institutionalised belief breeds a class to keep it; what that class's position makes it want; whether it is a fourth part of the machine or the form the belief-dial takes at scale; and why it is double-edged

The Class the Belief Requires

A legitimating belief, once it is more than a generation old and serves a society of any size, cannot maintain itself. It must be transmitted, defended against drift, adjudicated where its application is unclear, and shielded from rival readings — and that maintenance is work, done by people who occupy a position to do it. So every durable creed grows a class equipped to interpret it: the priest and theologian, the jurist and constitutional scholar, the economist and central banker, the party theoretician and ideologist. Mosca saw that the formula needed its keepers; Gramsci saw them most clearly and called them *organic intellectuals*, the stratum each rising class produces to elaborate and broadcast the world-view that legitimates its interests, and added that rule of this kind, hegemony, works by manufacturing consent in the institutions of civil society — the schools, the press, the churches — rather than by the open application of force. The interpreter class is where the managed belief stops being an atmosphere and becomes an institution with a payroll.

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What the Position Wants

Read the interpreter's position with the project's own tools and its incentives fall out at once. The interpreter's authority and livelihood depend on two things: that the belief remain authoritative, and that its interpretation remain a *specialised* skill the layman cannot perform. The first gives the class a stake in the creed's prestige; the second gives it a stake in the creed's *difficulty*. An interpreter class therefore tends, by the plain logic of its position and with no conspiracy required, to keep the canon intricate, its access credentialed, and its failures explained as faults of application rather than defects of the canon — for a doctrine simple enough that anyone could read it, or falsifiable enough that events could refute it, would dissolve the need for interpreters. This is the Moses dynamic of the foundational statement,

institutionalised: the founder's situated improvisations are canonised as scripture or as settled science, inherited by specialists who enforce them and who, when the world and the canon collide, fault the fidelity of the reader and never the text. "Too complicated for me to understand — thank goodness they are here" is not a confession the layman stumbles into. It is the output the interpreter's position is structured to produce.

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A Fourth Part, or the Dial at Scale — and Its Double Edge

This brief can now answer a question the framework had left open: is the interpreter class a fourth element of the machine, alongside the floor of force, the managed belief, and the position logic that works the two dials? The answer is no, and the no is clarifying. The interpreter class is not a fourth thing; it is the *institutional form the belief-dial necessarily takes* once a hierarchy is large and old enough that its formula can no longer be maintained by the air alone. It is the belief-dial's maintenance crew, and naming it as such keeps the machine at three parts and explains the crew's appearance as a structural inevitability rather than an accident. But there is an edge to it the framework must not miss, and it is the edge that connects this brief to the rest of the project. Because the interpreter class has its *own* institutional base — its own buildings, revenues, and esprit, distinct from the apex it serves — its interest in the *integrity of the canon* can come apart from the apex's interest in *power*, and when it does, the interpreter class becomes a counterweight that can pry the apex with the apex's own words. The church that excommunicates the king, the bench that holds the executive to the constitution it swore to, the economists who certify that the sovereign's debasement will bring ruin — each is an interpreter class turning the formula it keeps against the hand that thought it owned it. This is the loaded word of the project's other studies, seen from the inside: the words turned back are turned back, characteristically, by the very class paid to keep them, the moment keeping them faithfully and keeping the apex happy cease to be the same thing.

PART VI

THE RESIDUE THAT IS NOT RELATIVISM

How to hold that all belief is installed formation without collapsing into the claim that all beliefs are equal; why the dividing line is debuggability and not truth; and why the framework must turn this blade on itself

The Slide to Be Refused

There is a cliff at the edge of this proposition, and the whole of its usefulness depends on not going over it. If every legitimating belief is installed formation, and *false consciousness* is barred because there is no clear lens underneath, the tempting next step is to say that all beliefs are therefore on a level — that none is truer or better than another, that meritocracy and vanguardism and divine right are merely different costumes with nothing to choose between them, that it is formation all the way down and so judgement is impossible. That conclusion does not follow, and embracing it would be fatal, because it is itself a self-exempting creed — *everything is ideology*, announced from a nowhere the announcer has exempted from the everything — which is the exact structure of the false consciousness this brief spent its third part dismantling. The framework refuses the cliff, and it refuses it with a distinction it has carried from the beginning.

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Debuggable, Not True

The line that does the dividing is not *true versus false*; it is *tested versus revealed* — whether a belief is held in a way that exposes it to correction, or in a way that immunises it. All beliefs are installed; they are not all installed in the same posture. A tested belief carries within it the conditions under which it would be given up: it makes claims that the world could contradict, and when the world contradicts them the belief is revised. A revealed belief carries the opposite: every apparent disconfirmation is read as insufficient fidelity, faulty application, or the malice of enemies, so that nothing the world does can ever count against it. This is the axis along which legitimating beliefs genuinely differ, and it is the one that

false consciousness fumbled for and missed. The legitimate residue of ideology-critique is therefore never "your belief is false and mine is true" — that is the interpreter class's move, and it is barred. It is "this belief is structured so that it cannot be corrected" — an objection aimed not at the content's truth but at the creed's *posture* toward its own potential refutation. A meritocracy embedded in live plurality, whose claim that desert tracks reward can be measured, contested, and reformed, is doing something structurally different from a vanguardism that reads every famine as sabotage — not because one creed is true and the other false, but because one has left itself a way to be debugged and the other has sealed every door. The danger was never that people believe something installed early; everyone does. The danger is a belief that has arranged that it can never be wrong, married to a hierarchy that has foreclosed the counterweights through which it might have been tested.

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The Blade Turned Inward

The proposition is not exempt from itself, and saying so is the price of holding it honestly. This framework is also an installed formation, carried by people — its authors among them — whose position it suits; it could be the political formula of some interpreter class not yet named, and the only thing that would distinguish it from the creeds it anatomises is the one thing it asks of them: that it be held as *tested* and not as *revealed*, offered as the best current reading of how power keeps itself and discarded the moment the evidence requires, rather than defended as a key that explains everything and can be refuted by nothing. There is a resonance here that closes the circle of the whole project. Its coda takes its title, *What Is to Be Done*, from Lenin — from the very text in which the vanguard names itself the bringer of consciousness from without — and answers the question in the exact negative of Lenin's answer. There is no vanguard with the undistorted view; there is no interpreter holding the key; there is no clear lens to be liberated and no final state to arrive at. There is only the machine, the costume it happens to be wearing, and the discipline of asking, of one's own creed as readily as of any other, not whether it is true but whether it could survive being tested — and of tending, without end, the counterweights through which the testing is done. That discipline is the whole of what this project has to put in the place where the arc of progress used to stand.

A Note on Sources

This brief rests on the project's own foundational statements and on the lineage of elite theory, the sociology of legitimation, and the theory of ideology, used throughout in paraphrase. On the universality of the legitimating formula: Gaetano Mosca's Elementi di scienza politica (translated as The Ruling Class) on the political formula present in every organised society including the communist ones; Vilfredo Pareto on residues and derivations and the circulation of elites; and Robert Michels on the iron law of oligarchy, the tendency of even democratic and socialist parties to ossify into rule by the few. On the demand the formula answers: Max Weber on legitimate domination and the theodicy of the fortunate — the fortunate man's need to believe he has a right to his fortune, that good fortune wants to be legitimate fortune.

On the costumes: David Hume's observation, in Of the First Principles of Government, that it is on opinion only that government is founded; on the meritocratic costume, Michael Young's 1958 satire The Rise of the Meritocracy, which coined the word as the name of a dystopia before it was adopted as a compliment, read with Bourdieu on cultural capital and habitus. On the embedding mechanism: Pierre Bourdieu's habitus and doxa, and Louis Althusser's ideological state apparatuses and interpellation, with the school as the apparatus that installs the formula before it can be questioned. On false consciousness and the vanguard: Engels's 1893 letter to Franz Mehring, where the term first appears; the concept of ideology in Marx and Engels's German Ideology; Lenin's What Is to Be Done? of 1902, with its thesis that socialist consciousness must be brought to the workers from without; and Gramsci on hegemony and the organic intellectual. The conclusions, and the use to which the lineage is put, are the project's own.